

BURKE ON PARTY

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BURKE ON PARTY

BURKE was a great political teacher. He has had a great and good influence on public character in England. But he is not, like Hobbes, Montesquieu, Hume or Bentham, a calm inquirer meditating in his closet. He is always in the political arena. His works are pamphlets and speeches, called forth by the controversy of the hour, and require to be read with full allowance for the occasion which gave them birth. It is as an authority on finance and trade that he is least subject to qualification on this account. Called an adventurer, and being one in the literal sense of the term, he had, unlike the ordinary adventurer, taken the utmost pains to qualify himself for the public service by a profound study of all the subjects with which as a statesman he would have to deal. His knowledge of economical and commercial questions is wonderful considering that such knowledge was far less accessible to him in those days than it would be now; that he had never been practically engaged in commerce; and that he was thirty-seven years old when the *Wealth of Nations* appeared. In Burke's works and in the speeches of Daniel Webster before his change of line free traders will find some of the keenest shafts for their controversial quiver.

It is in a pamphlet eminently polemical that we read the well-known vindication of political party, so often cited by upholders of the party system of government.

"Party is a body of men united, for promoting by their joint endeavours the national interest, upon some particular principle in which they are all agreed. For my part, I find it impossible to conceive that any one believes in his own politicks, or thinks them to be of any weight, who refuses to adopt the means of having them reduced into practice. It is the business of the speculative philosopher to mark the proper ends of government. It is the business of the politician, who is the philosopher in action, to find out proper means towards those ends, and to employ them with effect. Therefore, every honourable connexion will avow it is their first purpose to pursue every just method to put the men who hold their opinions into such a condition as may enable them to carry their common plans into execution, with all the power and authority of the state. As this power is attached to certain situations, it is their duty to contend for these situations. Without a proscription of others, they

are bound to give to their own party the preference in all things; and by no means, for private considerations, to accept any offers of power in which the whole body is not included; nor to suffer themselves to be led, or to be controuled, or to be overbalanced, in office or in council, by those who contradict the very fundamental principles on which their party is formed, and even those upon which every fair connexion must stand. Such a generous contention for power, on such manly and honourable maxims, will easily be distinguished from the mean and interested struggle for place and emolument. The very style of such persons will serve to discriminate them from those numberless impostors, who have deluded the ignorant with professions incompatible with human practice, and have afterwards incensed them by practices below the level of vulgar rectitude."

Montesquieu or Bentham would not fail to tell us exactly what he means by "principle". Is it a general principle of political morality or expediency? About these we are all agreed; they are subjects of debate but can furnish no foundation for a party. Is it agreement on a particular question? A particular question, however momentous, even though it may be important enough to warrant a good citizen in temporary devotion to a party flag, will in time be settled. When it has been settled, what will then be left to warrant the continuance of the party tie? What will there be to bar the conversion of the party into a faction the leaders of which will fight for place with intrigue, calumny and corruption, while the followers will be held together by a shibboleth? This passage, which has been a frontlet between the eyes of devotees of the party system, requires, to be construed aright, the historical key.

Those who contend that party is a universal necessity of constitutional government are like the British footman who, seeing a French soldier in blue uniform, said that everybody knew that blue for a uniform was absurd except in the Artillery and the Horse Guards, Blue. Though there were forestallings of the party system under Charles II., the system really dates from the time when William III. found it necessary, as in his situation it certainly was, to compose his council entirely of men of the party who had set him on his throne. The Cabal in the time of Charles II. had been something like a Cabinet; but it was in reality what the name now imports; and it did not rest like the cabinet on the support of an organized party in Parliament. The constitutional executive of England was, and in the contemplation of law still is, the Privy Council, composed of men chosen as being highly qualified for the service of the crown and the state without reference to their gen-

eral opinions, in which they sometimes differed widely from each other. Under the monarchy, the members of the Privy Council were nominated by the king. The members of the Council of State, which under the Commonwealth took the place and assumed the functions of the Privy Council, were appointed by a process combining nomination with election. Should democracy with the party system ever break down, the Instrument of Government, in which the constitution of the Commonwealth was embodied, may deserve the attention of those to whose lot it may fall to conduct the necessary revolution.

So long as the struggle between the Hanoverians and the Stuarts, with their respective political creeds, continued, there was manifest ground for a division of parties in Parliament and at the polls, as well as on the fields of Sheriffmuir and Culloden. When that struggle closed in the collapse of the Stuarts, party broke into "connections", formed round the great houses, Pelham, Bedford, Rockingham, Granville, strong in their nomination boroughs and their territorial influence. The connections struggled against each other for power and place, while the tendency of all of them alike was to transfer the real control from the king to the minister with his train. George III., on the other hand, had imbibed the counsel of his mother, who was always bidding him "be a King". He was by no means inclined to be the puppet of his Mayor of the Palace. Personal government by prerogative, bare-faced, was no longer possible. In place of it was set on foot personal government by influence, the instruments of which were a regiment of sycophants styling themselves King's Friends, who held their votes in Parliament entirely at the disposal of the king, and when he gave the word thwarted the policy of his constitutional advisers. To put an end to the ascendancy of faction and restore the authority of the head of the whole nation was the professed object of the King's Friends. Chatham, on the other hand, standing apart in his towering popularity, wanted a parliamentary autocracy of Chatham. He refused to combine with the Rockingham connection, to which Burke belonged, and formed under himself a departmental ministry of men unconnected with each other, his leadership being the only bond of union, while he kept all the power in his own hands. The chief portion of the *Thoughts on the Present Discontents* is directed against "Influence" and the King's Friends; the concluding part is a satirical attack on the autocratic administration of Chatham with his set of departmental subordinates, political strangers to each other. No personal government by influence, no autocracy of Chatham; but constitutional government with the Rockingham

connection in power, is the moral of the pamphlet and the key to its interpretation.

Not much support, therefore, can be found in the arguments of Burke's pamphlet for a system which cuts a nation perpetually in two, and sets the halves to wage everlasting war with each other for possession of the government with the familiar weapons of faction. Upholders of the system, at a loss for a permanent ground of division, have been fain to have recourse to the comic opera, and to maintain that each of us is born a little Conservative or a little Liberal. It is needless to say that there is no such bisection of human character. Its shades melt indistinguishably into each other. What would Burke himself have said to the constitution of a country perpetually divided into two party organizations recognized by law, always remaining on foot and fighting periodically with a fury approaching that of civil war, while not only the special issues but the vital character of each party underwent from time to time complete change? Would he not have said that such a commonwealth was in a perilous condition? Would he in so saying have been far wrong? Looking not to organization, but to character, who would recognize the identity of the Republican party in the United States, as it is now, with the Republican party before or even during the war?

Chatham's autocracy was killed by the gout, combined with waywardness on the part of the autocrat. That in its headless state it brought on the American Revolution by taxing the colonies may be said to have been partly chargeable to the philosophy of Burke. Contempt for political theory, indifference to constitutional forms, regard solely to the practical policy and conduct of government, were not only the tendencies but the constant professions of Burke, who was the very opposite of Sieyès. Burke, no doubt, drew for the Rockinghams the Declaratory Act affirming the power of Parliament to legislate on all subjects for the colonies, under the shelter of which the British Government sought to withdraw with dignity when it was compelled to repeal the stamp tax. Burke thought the form was of no practical importance inasmuch as it was certain that no dangerous use if any use at all would ever be made of the power. The sequel is too well known.

Burke carried his disregard of theoretic perfection compared with practical expediency to an excessive length. He fought against any reform of Parliament with its petty Cornish constituencies, its unenfranchised Manchester and Birmingham, its Gatton and its Old Sarum, its nomination boroughs and open sale of seats. He even wished to reduce the extent of the franchise on the ground of the

disorders attending popular elections. That the institution worked well, at least in his opinion, was enough. But an institution which shocked common sense, though it might happen to be working well or not very ill, could not fail to be morally weak. An anomaly, even one harmless in itself, is an evil if it diminishes the citizens' respect for the institutions of the state. In the American Senate, where power now centres, New York has not more representatives than Nevada. We are assured that this theoretic imperfection is no practical evil. The future will probably show.

On the death of Chatham, "Influence" triumphed, with Lord North for its parliamentary agent, and put "faction", that is the independence of Parliament, under its feet. Yorktown was ruin to it for a moment, but it recovered itself by an intrigue for which the opportunity was given it through the reaction against the North and Fox coalition, and the unpopularity of the India Bill; though after all it found that it had given itself a master instead of a tool in the young Pitt.

A strange realization of Burke's ideal of party was that coalition of Fox and North, in which he held the office of paymaster of the forces, and signalized his own patriotism by renunciation of its irregular gains. The members of his ideal party were to be united not by political sympathy only but by personal esteem and confidence. The model was the group of Whig statesmen beloved and lauded by Addison. Between the two heads of the coalition there had been not only dissension the most violent on the great question of the day, but personal enmity of the bitterest kind. Fox had threatened North with impeachment and denounced him as a man lost to honor, connection with whom would be infamy. Their two sections had joined battle in the Wilkes case, on the issues of liberty of speech and publicity in the proceedings of Parliament. The saying that enmities were short but friendships were eternal had a fine sound, but hardly covered a sudden reversal, for the sake of place, of one man's opinion of the character of another. Burke had no business in the coalition government. But he had lost a worthy leader in Rockingham, and found one much less worthy, though far superior in ability, and as a political athlete, in Fox, a man brought up under the paternal roof of the most unscrupulous intriguer of the day, a debauchee, and a desperate gambler. In Fox Burke had the most attractive of companions and the worst of political guides.

The force which carried Pitt into power was not party but hatred of the coalition with its India Bill and feeling in favor of the son of Chatham, combined with the influence of the Crown. There were Radicals as well as Tories in Pitt's original majority.

When division was formed afresh by the outbreak of the French Revolution, Burke burst his party tie and broke violently with the leader of the Whigs.

There is a common impression that Burke was a great statesman destined by nature for the highest trust, but by the narrow jealousy of the Whig oligarchy kept out of his due. This notion was fostered by Disraeli, whom the Whigs had failed to appreciate, and who identified himself with Burke, taking his title of Beaconsfield from the great man's home. The impression derives some color from a passage in the *Thoughts on the Present Discontents* where the writer avows that the part of the constitution which he would be most content to resign is aristocracy, "that austere and insolent domination"; as well as from the encounter with the Duke of Bedford. But there could hardly be a greater type of Whig aristocracy than Rockingham, who introduced Burke into public life and seems to have treated his illustrious secretary as a colleague, though Burke somewhat compromised his position by the acceptance of pecuniary favors from Rockingham. We have perhaps rather over-rated the effect of aristocratic exclusiveness generally in shutting the gate at that period against political merit. Three prime ministers, Addington, Jenkinson and Canning, were distinctly plebeians. Sheridan fought under no cold shade. A number of names might be cited, not distinctly plebeian, yet not in the full sense aristocratic, the holders of which found their way to high place. The vehemence of Burke's temper, which was the Celtic part of his character, and the violence of his impulses, caused him, even when he was battling for the right, to commit errors of judgment and taste which cost him the confidence of the House of Commons and made those who witnessed them speak of him as insane. Insanity itself, indeed, could hardly have been less of a qualification for dealing with high matters of state than the fury which broke all bounds not only of good sense and moderation, but of the commonest decency, in Burke's conduct in the impeachment of Warren Hastings. The *Reflections on the French Revolution*, recklessly inflaming public feeling at the most dangerous of all possible junctures, when it was the manifest object of statesmanship to keep it cool, is another proof of the unfitness of the author for the highest trust. Further proofs were the relations into which Burke got with the frenzied émigrés and his own passionate outcries for war.

Burke's works are a school of political wisdom as well as of noble sentiment, but it is always to be borne in mind that he is an orator and a pamphleteer.

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